Lithuania's Party Breaks With Moscow

Leader Says Eventual Goal Is Republic's Independence

By David Remnick
Washington Post Foreign Service

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R., Dec. 20—Lithuania's Communist Party broke with Moscow today, becoming the first in the history of the Soviet Union to declare itself independent of the national party.

Calling the move "a historic moment," Lithuanian party leader Algirdis Brazauskas said that the republic's party would make Lithuania's eventual independence its primary goal.

Much like the transformation of the Communist parties in Hungary and East Germany, the Lithuanian party made its decision to reform itself as an attempt to regain prestige at a period when other movements and parties in the region have won widespread support. The Lithuanian Communists, however, are in a much more difficult political position. Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has repeatedly warned them against splitting with Moscow and against endorsing Lithuanian independence.

The vote for party independence was overwhelming: 855 delegates to a special party congress meeting here in the Lithuanian capital voted

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for an independent party with its own programs and statutes, while 160 voted for an independent party but within the confines of the national organization. There were 12 abstentions.

"I hope and wish our party will always be resolute, rejuvenated and ready for new battles," Brazauskas said. One speaker after another said they were tired of taking directions from Moscow and would now be able to act in the interests of their local constituents. Earlier this month Lithuanian legislators dropped the Communist monopoly on power from the republic's constitution, setting the stage for multiparty elections next month for the republic's legislature.

The Communists declared their intention to compete on an equal footing with the independent group Sajudis, the Social Democrats, the Democratic Party, the Christian Democrats and the Green Party. The Communists said they would even be willing to form a "united front" for independence with the republic's other parties and groups.

"Now we are freed from the catechism of Moscow," declared one Lithuanian Communist Party speaker at the congress, "and Moscow will have to accept the Lithuanian Communist Party as it is."

Another speaker, writer Romas Gulaitis, said the Lithuanians had made their move because "the Communist Party of the Soviet Union is still steeped in Stalinism. We can no longer live with the history we inherited from the Bolshevik Party."

In its "Declaration of Independence of the Communist Party of Lithuania," the party said that membership would be voluntary and that its major goals would be Lithuania's "independence, a democratic society and the implementation of the ideals of humanistic socialism." The party also said it would tolerate free expression of opinion and wide differences of convictions and beliefs "provided they do not contradict universal human values."

The party's endorsement of eventual independence for Lithuania is a heavy blow for Moscow. Now every major political party and organization in the republic has endorsed independence as a goal and, if the Kremlin wants to prevent secession, it will now be forced to act without the help of local instruments of power.

Lithuania was an independent state in the two decades before World War II. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between the Nazis and the Soviet Union led to the Soviet annexation in 1940 of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—a move that many in the Baltic states, including the Lithuanian Communist Party, consider illegal occupation.

Early next year Lithuania is to hold local and regional elections, and local political analysts predict that among the official parties the Communists will get about 35 percent of the vote while the Social Democrats, a party begun just this year, will have 10 percent. Sajudis is expected to dominate the local elections as it did the national legislative elections last March.